

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

January 28, 2005

The President  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to request that you direct each department and agency of the Executive Branch to disclose to the appropriate Committee of the House of Representatives all public relations and advertising contracts signed during your Administration.

Over the past year, multiple investigations have revealed that federal agencies have employed secret publicity campaigns to promote administration priorities.

- In separate analyses, the Government Accountability Office found that the Department of Health and Human Services and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy violated the congressional prohibition on publicity and propaganda by distributing fabricated video news reports.<sup>1</sup>
- An investigative report by *USA Today* revealed that the Department of Education paid a conservative commentator to support the No Child Left Behind Act in television and radio appearances.<sup>2</sup>
- Earlier this week, the *Washington Post* reported the Department of Health and Human Services had a contract with a syndicated columnist who promoted the President's marriage initiative.<sup>3</sup>
- A newly released congressional report found that public relations spending has more than doubled during the Bush Administration.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services — Video News Releases* (May 19, 2004) (GAO/B-302710). U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Office of National Drug Control Policy — Video News Release* (Jan. 4, 2005) (GAO/B-303495).

<sup>2</sup> *White House Paid Commentator to Promote Law*, *USA Today*, (Jan. 7, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> *Writer Backing Bush Plan had Gotten Federal Contract*, *Washington Post* (Jan. 25, 2005).

- And today, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Salon.com* reported that the Department of Health and Human Services paid another conservative commentator thousands of dollars to support the marriage initiative, including by speaking about the importance of marriage to churches and community organizations.<sup>5</sup>

These developments raise serious concerns. Covert propaganda campaigns are unethical and illegal. Those disclosed to date mislead the American people about public policy and deceive the news media and press about the credibility of critiques of Administration policies. We very much hope the contracts revealed to this point are an aberration and not part of a pattern across federal agencies.

To assist us in understanding the scope of public relations and propaganda contracted for by federal agencies, we request that you provide to the Democratic Leader, and to the appropriate Committee of jurisdiction, the following:

- (1) All contracts executed during the Bush Administration with public relations firms, advertising agencies, public opinion research firms, media organizations, and individual members of the media, including any modifications of such contracts.
- (2) All subcontracts executed under the contracts identified under (1), including any modifications of such subcontracts.
- (3) Any documents or communications that describe or assess the work performed under these contracts and subcontracts.
- (4) A copy of the justification and approval documents for any of these contracts entered into using less than full and open competition.

The possibility of a widespread practice of covert propaganda raises the most serious of concerns. The Congress, the press, and the American people all deserve a full disclosure of the Administration's policy on such propaganda.

It has already been nearly one month since the Democratic Leader and Ranking Members Henry Waxman, George Miller, David Obey, and Elijah Cummings wrote to you requesting full

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<sup>4</sup> House Committee on Government Reform, *Federal Public Relations Spending*, (January 26, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> *HHS says it paid columnist for help*, *USA Today*, (January 28, 2005); *Federal Contracts With Columnists Prompt Change in Policy*, *Los Angeles Times*, (January 28, 2005); *Third columnist caught with hand in the Bush till*, *Salon.com*, (January 27, 2005).

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disclosure of these contracts.<sup>6</sup> To date, we have received no reply to that inquiry. Now that there have been additional revelations, we would appreciate your cooperation with this inquiry, and would appreciate a complete response by March 1, 2005.

Sincerely,

Rep. Nancy Pelosi, House Democratic Leader  
Rep. Steny H. Hoyer, House Democratic Whip  
Rep. Robert Menendez, Chairman, House Democratic Caucus  
Rep. James E. Clyburn, Vice Chair, House Democratic Caucus  
Rep. Rosa DeLauro, Co-Chair, Steering and Policy Committee  
Rep. Dave R. Obey, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Appropriations  
Rep. Ike Skelton, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Armed Services  
Rep. John M. Spratt, Jr., Ranking Minority Member, Committee on the Budget  
Rep. George Miller, Ranking Minority Member Committee on Education and the Workforce  
Rep. John D. Dingell, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce  
Rep. Barney Frank, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Financial Services  
Rep. Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform  
Rep. Bennie Thompson, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Homeland Security  
Rep. Juanita Millender-McDonald, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on House Administration  
Rep. Tom Lantos, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on International Relations  
Rep. John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Minority Member, Committee on the Judiciary  
Rep. Louise McIntosh Slaughter, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Rules  
Rep. Bart Gordon, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Science  
Rep. Nydia M. Velazquez, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Small Business  
Rep. James L. Oberstar, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Transportation  
Rep. Lane Evans, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Rep. Charles B. Rangel, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Ways and Means

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi et al. to the President (Jan. 7, 2005).

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

January 21, 2005

The Honorable Jo Anne B. Barnhart  
Commissioner  
Social Security Administration  
6401 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, MD 21235-0001

Dear Ms. Barnhart:

It is critical that the public retain confidence in the Social Security Administration (SSA) as a source of unbiased and accurate information about the Social Security program. Congress made SSA an independent agency with an Administrator whose tenure differs from Presidential terms in part to help protect both the programs you administer and the information that you provide to the public from any appearance of undue political influence. We know that you share these concerns and we appreciate your commitment to Social Security and to the sound administration of the programs you oversee.

We are writing about recent developments that raise concerns about a possible threat to the independence and impartiality that is so important to maintaining public confidence in Social Security and in the information provided by SSA. These developments also suggest the possibility of inappropriate White House interference with the activities of your agency.

We recently obtained a copy of the Social Security Administration's "National Strategic Communications Plan for FY 2005," as well as its "Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan" for the Kansas City region. These documents were the subject of major articles in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* on Sunday.

The documents raise serious concerns about whether federal employees are being inappropriately enlisted to promote the Bush Administration's political agenda. For example, the "Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan" states that agency employees should disseminate the following message to "all audiences": "Social Security's long-term financing problems are serious and need to be addressed soon" or else Social Security may not "be there for future generations."<sup>1</sup>

The documents also raise concerns about the use of government-funded propaganda. According to the "Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan," the Social Security Administration

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<sup>1</sup> Social Security Administration, *Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan Kansas City Region* (Feb. 14, 2004); see also Social Security Administration, *Office of Communications' Fiscal Year 2005 National Strategic Communications Plan* (Oct. 2004).

intends to "place articles on solvency in external publications." The same plan indicates that the Social Security Administration intends to use the "mediums" of "[r]adio, TV, newspapers," as well as "[e]mployer and special interest publications," to spread the message that "the sooner changes are made, the more time people will have to adjust." The plan also directs the agency to "[l]ook for non-traditional locations to educate people about the Social Security system, such as outreach events at farmer's markets, big box retail stores, etc."<sup>2</sup>

Under federal law, it is illegal to spend appropriated funds on publicity or propaganda.<sup>3</sup> This ban has been interpreted to include covert propaganda that does not reveal its source as well as propaganda with a purely partisan purpose.<sup>4</sup> We have concerns about whether the efforts described in these documents comply with this prohibition. For this reason, we request copies of all written communications and documents that relate to the "National Strategic Communications Plan" and the "Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan" for any region.

Our request includes, but is not limited to:

- All articles placed or attempted to place in external publications;
- All materials created for radio, TV, or newspapers;
- All materials created for employer and special interest publications;
- All materials prepared for any outreach to "non-traditional" locations, such as farmer's markets and big box retailers;
- Additional internal documents describing the goals of, and the methods used in preparing, the "National Strategic Communications Plan" and the "Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan;"
- Copies of any contracts with advertising and public relations firms associated with the implementation of the plan, including any subcontracts and modifications to those contracts; and
- Budget and staffing information for this effort.

In addition, we request that you provide all contracts executed by the Social Security Agency during the Bush Administration with public relations firms, advertising agencies, media organizations, individual members of the media, and polling firms, including all subcontracts and any modifications of such contracts.

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-199, Div. F, Tit. VI, Sec. 624, 118 Stat. 3, 356 (2004).

<sup>4</sup> *E.g.*, U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services — Video News Releases*, 10 (May 19, 2004) (GAO/B-302710).

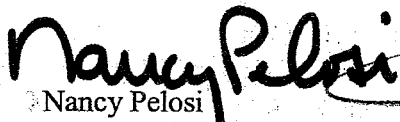
The Honorable Jo Anne B. Barnhart  
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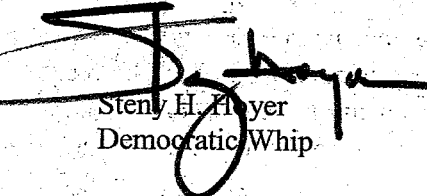
The enclosed documents suggest activities that would be more appropriate for White House staff than for SSA staff. We would also like to know whether any White House staff members were involved in initiating or developing the plans or whether the project was conceived and developed independently and entirely within SSA.


We have enclosed copies of the "National Strategic Communications Plan" and the "Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan" for your review. We request that you provide the information we have requested by February 2, 2005.

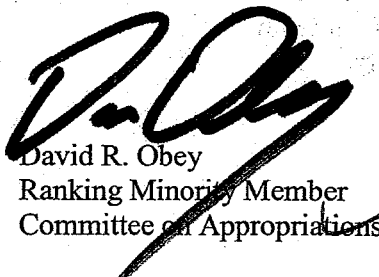
Thank you in advance for your assistance with this matter. We look forward to continuing to work with you in your efforts to ensure that Social Security programs are effectively managed and retain public confidence.

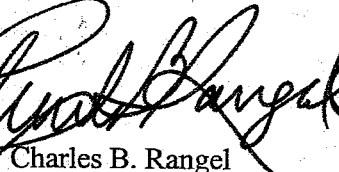
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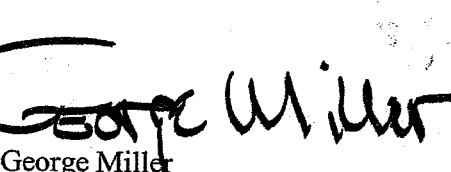
  
Nancy Pelosi  
Democratic Leader

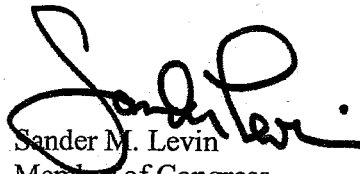
  
Steny H. Hoyer  
Democratic Whip

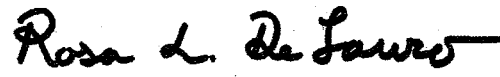
  
Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Government  
Reform

  
David R. Obey  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Appropriations

  
Charles B. Rangel  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Ways and  
Means

  
George Miller  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Education and  
the Workforce

  
Sander M. Levin  
Member of Congress

  
Rosa L. DeLauro  
Member of Congress

Enclosures (2)